

# Don't be fooled by pleasant autumn days in August on the Kenai

by Doug Newbould

August on the Kenai Peninsula is bittersweet—like strong coffee with a hint of chocolate, a mixed bag of goodies with a few sour apples thrown in, languid on the surface but with dangerous undercurrents. There are warm sunny days and cool rainy days, muggy-buggy evenings and foggy mornings. The fireweed is going to seed and will soon turn crimson. The pinks and cohos are beginning where the sockeyes and chinooks left off. And all the while, the specter of winter is lurking in the lengthening shadows—grinning. Sorry for using the “W”—word, but bear with me—I’m trying to make a point.

Growing up in southern Illinois, somewhere between the Cubs and the Cardinals, I remember August as weeks of oppressive heat and humidity or as the “dog days of summer”. I’m not sure where the phrase originated but I vaguely remember its use in conjunction with baseball on many a hot summer night. Perhaps it was uttered by one of the two great baseball voices I grew up listening to: Harry “IT COULD BE. IT MIGHT BE... IT IS—A HOME RUN!” Carey or Jack “I can’t believe what I just saw!” Buck.

I mention the Cubbies and the Redbirds because they’re what I remember about August as a kid: sitting with my Grandpa on the front porch, listening to the ball game on the radio, an oscillating fan providing fleeting moments of relief while the cicadas droned on-and-on out in the yard. Besides baseball, there was not much else going on in that part of the world—unless you liked watching corn and soybeans grow. August had a way of making you feel like an old dog lying on its side in the dirt with its tongue lolling out, unable to find the energy to raise its head. That’s the image I get from the “dog days of summer”.

August tells a different story in Alaska. It reminds us that summer is ephemeral so far north. It reminds us that complacency can kill. I was reminded of that fact last weekend when two people I know (let’s call them Fred and Ginger to protect their identities) were exposed (no pun intended) to the harsher side of August. Fred, a mountain runner, decided to take his annual run around Crescent Lake (from Crescent Creek

to Carter Lake). His friend, Ginger, an aspiring mountain runner whose plantar fasciitis (foot injury) prevented her from running with Fred, decided to mountain bike the trail instead.

When the two trail trekkers departed Soldotna, the skies were partly cloudy and the temperature was pleasant. They packed light, taking just water and light exercise clothes for a trail run that should be completed in less than three hours—all things considered.

At the trailhead, Fred and Ginger decided that Fred would run to the Carter Lake Trailhead about 16 miles away. Fred was of the opinion he would finish before Ginger due to the roughness of certain sections of the trail, and he was skeptical a bike could be ridden all the way. So the plan was for Ginger to ride up to Crescent Lake and assess the trail conditions. If the trail was too rough or overgrown, she would spend a little time seeing the sights, then return to the Crescent Creek Trailhead. If the trail was passable, she would continue on to the Carter Lake Trailhead. At the end of his run, Fred would catch a ride back to Crescent Creek, get the truck and reunite with Ginger. Then, they could go have a bite to eat at one of Cooper Landing’s local eateries.

The plan seemed reasonable, so off they went. Fred eventually left Ginger behind on the climb up to Crescent Lake and when he arrived at the lake, he found the trail so overgrown he could not see his feet. He thought to himself there was no way Ginger would attempt to ride around the lake, and even walking the bike around would be painful (eight miles of bush-whacking through devil’s club and pushki). So he finished his difficult run and thumbed a ride back to Sunrise and the trailhead.

When he arrived, Ginger was not there. “She should be here soon,” he thought. After waiting for an hour or so, he decided to drive to the Carter Lake Trailhead to see if she had completed the “difficult passage”. She wasn’t there. So he drove back to the other trailhead again, but—no Ginger. Now Fred was worried, “What could have happened to her? Is she injured? Did she run into a bear?” That’s when Fred decided to

get some help.

Fred called me about 9:00 p.m., knowing my familiarity with the area and how we could get help if necessary. He quickly explained the situation, and I suggested he make one more trip to the Carter Lake Trailhead then meet me at the Crescent Creek trail. I grabbed my backpack with raingear, first aid supplies, a fleece jacket, GPS receiver, flashlight and water and headed out the door.

On my way up the Sterling Highway I noted the dark clouds over the Kenai Mountains, and I thought, “I hope Ginger has raingear or at least something to keep her warm.” Coming into Cooper Landing, my cell phone beeped at me and I saw I had missed two calls from home: the first told me Fred didn’t find Ginger at Carter Lake so he was waiting for me at Sunrise; and the second said Ginger was safely off the trail at the Carter lake trailhead and waiting for Fred.

Of course, Fred and I were quite relieved to hear the good news, and Fred quickly returned to pick up a very tired, hungry, scratched-up and moderately-hypothermic Ginger. Afterward, we all got together and talked about what happened and about the things that should have been done differently.

As it turned out, Ginger made it up to Crescent Lake alright, but discovered the seat bolt had fallen out. Without a replacement bolt or tools she could not repair the seat, so she started walking the bike around Crescent Lake. At some point along the lake she passed the “point of no return” and decided to continue to trail’s end. The rain showers made her wet,

but bush-whacking through head-high wet vegetation kept her wet for hours. Ginger said she knew she was getting hypothermic but there was nothing to do but keep moving down the trail. She did see one bear on the trail, but it was moving away from her.

When she finally made it off the trail about 11:00p.m., and discovered Fred was not around, she knew she needed to get some help. She stripped off as much of her wet clothing as she could modestly get away with. Then, she flagged down a passing motorist who graciously gave her a fleece shirt and let her use his phone (a big thanks to the good Samaritan!).

The lessons we can learn from Fred’s and Ginger’s adventure are: always be prepared for cool, wet weather, don’t travel alone, plan for contingencies (what if—and what’s the worst that could happen), make a trip plan and follow it, and always carry sufficient survival gear in the backcountry. Also, be sure to drink plenty of water even in cool, wet weather. Dehydration contributes to hypothermia, poor decision-making and/or disorientation. And most importantly, “You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy!” August means the end of summer in Alaska, so instead of expecting the dog days of summer—you’d better be prepared for a three-dog night.

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